

It is, as I have said, in the third stanza where this sense of the innermost horror of the poem can be detected. Certainly, this is where the poem's sounding of the poet's interiority is at its deepest. "In all my dreams," Owen begins, indicating his profound inability to extricate himself from the unconscious repetitions of the scene that have infiltrated his psyche like an incubus, renewing their assault on him on a nightly basis. What I am asking is whether the poem may secrete in these lines—as the word "plunging" secretes the word "lunging"¹—that in the haunting scene, the man was repeatedly attempting to pull off Owen's own mask, and that Owen resisted this. (The present simple "plunges" is again nicely ambiguous, so that we cannot really tell whether the repetitions were at the time, or since, or both.) My conclusion would be that, insofar as the poem suggests or accommodates such a reading, it also can seem to broaden and deepen its grasp, even so far as to acknowledge covertly that the deepest, complicating iniquity of war is that its events can dispossess one of one's best self, dividing oneself from oneself and others and overwhelming one's most humane of responses toward pity and truth.²

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NOTES

1. And as the word "guttering" secretes the sense of a gutter overflowing as well as a candle dying.

2. A year or so after writing the poem, of course, on returning to the front, Owen would be awarded the Military Cross for gallantry in resisting an enemy counter-attack, on the Fossemeuse Line, when he "inflicted considerable losses on the enemy" through his use of a machine gun. Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974) 279. Of this episode, he wrote to his mother the half-truth, "I only shot one man with my revolver" (580).

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Tolkien's THE LORD OF THE RINGS and Dante's INFERNO

Whatever one thinks of *The Lord of the Rings* as a literary work, it is undeniable that J. R. R. Tolkien was a well-educated and intelligent man who drew on his erudition in writing his trilogy. Reading the novels carefully, one can see that just as he takes pieces from *Beowulf* and from Norse and Celtic

mythology, fitting all together to create his own meanings, he has also echoed images and passages from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, again not just as appropriations, but for their literary associations. Tolkien, as a medievalist, would certainly have been very familiar with *The Divine Comedy*, and it is not surprising that he would draw on Dante to enhance the spiritual dimension of his novels. Presumably, Tolkien read Dante in the original, as his biographer Humphrey Carpenter mentions that Italian was one of Tolkien's many languages (119). Thus, it hardly seems coincidental that several episodes, places, and characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are similar to those in *The Inferno*. The allusions to Dante in Tolkien's novels are subtle, designed to let those who are familiar with Dante draw their own comparisons and appreciate the tenor of these comparisons. Each of the allusions adds a layer of complexity to the novels' meaning and emotional atmosphere, but yet taken together, they also suggest a plausible way of understanding the symbolism of the orcs. This is important because critics such as Ishtay Landa have seen the orcs as a conservative Englishman's view of the lower classes and non-Western foreigners (120). If we see Tolkien as using allusions to Dante to both unify the work and add to the emotional effect of specific scenes, we can also find a way of viewing the orcs that seems more in keeping with the sophisticated mind one finds in Tolkien's critical writing.

Consider one of the first examples. The way over Caradhras is blocked and the fellowship has to descend into the Mines of Moria, just as Dante cannot climb the heavenly mountain until he has descended into Hell in canto 11. This helps to suggest the degree to which Frodo's journey, like that of the character Dante, is spiritual as well as physical. Frodo, it seems, must learn more about the nature of evil before he can do what he has committed himself to accomplishing, just as Dante must come to a recognition of sin before he can be redeemed. The resemblance to *The Inferno* is intensified by the presence of The Watcher outside the Gates of Moria, who resembles the Guardian figures that bar the ways of Virgil and Dante at each level of hell (Plautus, Cerebus, the Minotaur, and so on). The Watcher's attempt to grab Frodo echoes the way in which all the Guardians threaten and frighten Dante. All of this, in both cases, suggests the cost at which knowledge is gained. Of course, there are differences in the two situations, because, although Tolkien makes use of symbolism, the novel is not intended to be an allegory, as Tolkien himself repeatedly pointed out. Frodo's purpose is not personal redemption, but the battle against an external evil. The references to Dante are allusions, not exact parallels, and one reading of these associations does not exclude other readings.

And so on for the other allusions: whatever meanings they suggest are ambiguous, and they do not merely suggest meanings on an intellectual level. They add to the feeling of the hellishness of Frodo's journey. Frodo, Sam, and

Gollum have to traverse the foul-smelling Dead Marshes, full of dead elves, orcs, and men, just as Virgil and Dante have to cross the equally odorous Dead Swamp (in John Ciardi's translation, but presumably the word could be translated as either marsh or swamp) in canto 8. The Dead Marshes episode and its echoes of Dante's Dead Swamp not only emphasize the hellishness of war, but also makes an old battlefield look like a classic punishment of the damned. Perhaps, if this is not stretching the point too far, as it is the wrathful and sullen whose punishment is submersion in the Dead Swamp, one might infer that part of the horror of war is that it brings out these qualities in some men who might not have felt these deadly emotions in more peaceful times and makes them suffer like the damned. Because this allusion is not fixed but merely suggestive, it does not prevent the Dead Marshes episode from also carrying associations of the dead in the water-filled trenches of World War I, which so many critics have mentioned as the source of this episode in Tolkien. Indeed, it makes the World War I reference more poignant.

In another example, Mordor is dominated by a great tower just as the city of Dis is in canto 8, which suggests, in both cases, that the imposing power of evil is not just a trait, but a construction. The similarity also suggests some parallel between Sauron and Satan, although it does not mean that Sauron is Satan, nor does it exclude the idea that Sauron is also the embodiment of the human will to power. The sharp rocks, cliffs, and crumbling stairways that Sam, Frodo, and Gollum have to scale to reach Mordor seem drawn from the disintegrating staircases and precipices that Dante and Virgil have to clamber down to reach each successive circle of hell. Just as Dante and Virgil need the Heavenly Messenger to open the gates of the city of Dis (canto 8), Sam needs Galadriel's light to enter the tower of Mordor where Frodo is being held prisoner. In both works, the sight of the stars implies spiritual hope, which is why the stars are invisible in hell and almost invisible in Mordor. All of this helps to establish the pattern of allusion that makes Mordor both Hell and a part of Middle Earth.

This motif from Dante, furthermore, provides a context for the similarity between the brutality and coarseness of the orcs and those of Dante's demons, because it helps us to understand what Tolkien may have meant the orcs to represent. When Merry and Pippin are captured by Ugluk, and again when Sam overhears the quarreling orcs Shagrat and Gorbag, these orcs seem very much like the demons who punish the grafters in canto 21 with such sadistic cheerfulness, down to their ugly nicknames. In John Ciardi's translation, these demons have names such as Snatcher, Grizzle, and Hellkin (Dante 177). Furthermore, in his commentary on the section, Ciardi remarks, "The fiends obviously constitute a kind of debased military organization [. . .]" (172), which also applies to Tolkien's orcs, with their quarrels about their orders, the lines of authority, and the distribution of booty. The orcs also behave like damned souls in the bolgia of the grafters and thieves, constantly preying on one

another and adding to each other's torments. And just as Dante and Virgil are frequently able to flee each circle, leaving the damned souls and demons quarreling among themselves, all of the hobbits are able to escape their orc captors because of the petty quarrels among the orcs. Consider the incident in canto 22, for instance, when

Grizzle turned his talons against Hellkin
locked with him claw to claw above the ditch,
But Hellkin was sparrowhawk enough for two
and clawed him well [A detailed description of the fight follows, until]
[. . .] turning to one side
we slipped off, leaving them thus occupied. (Dante 178)

This could as easily be a description of Merry, Pippin, or Sam's escape, if Tolkien's verse were as elegant as Ciardi's.

If one interprets the similarities in their outward behavior as allusive of similar spiritual conditions, the orcs may also be like Dante's demons and the damned souls in that they are damned precisely because they no longer have the power to recognize the evil of their actions. At any rate, seeing the orcs as based on Dante's demons helps to exculpate Tolkien from the charge of racism, because one could argue that the orcs are not intended to be representative of any race, class, or nationality, but of the souls that have surrendered their power to choose good. Of course, alas, people can also see their human enemies in just these terms. Nevertheless, added to the allusion is the fact that Tolkien does distinguish between orcs and the various human nationalities who have chosen to follow Sauron. The latter, one recalls, Aragorn pardons and sends back to their own countries, suggesting that Tolkien believes that all living human beings are redeemable because they have the power to choose good no matter what their past sins.

The allusion does not limit us to a purely religious interpretation of the orcs. We can also see the orcs as embodying all the very worst qualities of human beings: betrayal, wanton destructiveness, and delight in cruelty. Or they may be monsters like Grendel, "whose main function is hostility to humanity (and its frail efforts at order and art upon earth)" (Tolkien 35). Noting their resemblances to Dante's demons is simply another way of understanding why Tolkien has made the orcs so purely evil, especially when taken in conjunction with the allusions to *The Inferno* throughout the trilogy.

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NOTE

I am indebted for this insight to my student Ella Van Wyk, who mentioned this in a conversation concerning her senior project on Dante's *Inferno*.

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Swenson's THE UNIVERSE

Although it may at first appear formless, even chaotic as it crawls down the page, "The Universe" is an experiment in form. If we skim it quickly from top to bottom, we see four embedded columns: a "what" column, an "about" column," a "the universe" column, which is also a "because" or "be cause" column, and a "we think" column. Unlike most free-verse poems, in which line beginnings create a straight-line vertical left margin, "The Universe" has no meaningful left margin. It does, however, have something resembling a straight-line vertical right margin. If we hold the poem up to a mirror, noting the way it lies on the page, it more nearly resembles a poem using conventional typography. "The Universe," then, is a reflection, a mirror image of what we expect to see when we look at a poem. Is this also what we see when we look at *the universe*? May Swenson's highly, though idiosyncratically, structured poem implicitly raises and answers this question.

Explicitly, it asks nine other questions and leaves all nine unanswered. Perhaps most significant is the one in the opening lines: "What / is it about, / the universe . . . ?" (1–3). This question carries several unstated assumptions: that the universe must be about something, that one ought to be able to discover this unknown something, and that ratiocination—mulling it over—is as good a way as any of uncovering an answer; of finding, as Swenson says in the title of another of her poems, "The Key to Everything."

And sure enough, an answer is immediately forthcoming; not, however, because of our mental prowess. The last half of the question that opens the poem replies to the first half, though the answer it offers, mere word play, is far from satisfying. What is the universe "about" (2)? It is all "about / us stretching out" (5–6)—"about" in line 5 meaning simply *around* or *surrounding*, whereas "about" in line 2 refers to indwelling meaning or authorial intention or central focus (as in "What is this book about?"). The phrase "stretching out" may be an oblique reference to the expanding universe theory, suggesting that the question grows ever more difficult to answer because the